

'Not in any literal, vulgar way': The Encoded Love Story of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*

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The openness of Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* has invited more analytical attempts, and more critical controversy, than most literary texts. Concerning what actually takes place in James' story, one may discern four different strategies of reading. The first two comprise the by far greatest number of interpretations: the "metaphysical," according to which the novella is a ghost story and the ghosts actually make appearances to the governess, and the "Freudian," which explains the "supernatural" events as the fabrications of a sexually frustrated mind¹ The third mode of reading has attracted few critics; in this version Mrs Grose manipulates the governess in order to herself become in charge of Bly.² The fourth set of interpretations are unified by their assertion that Douglas is Miles grown up, and that Miles consequently never dies but that the governess has produced a piece of fiction.

My own reading of James' text takes as its starting-point the assumptions of the fourth "school." Although so far six scholars have offered

1. For a discussion of the controversy over these two types of reading, see Peter G. Beidler, "A Critical History of *The Turn of the Screw*," *Henry James, The Turn of the Screw*, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Boston: St. Martin's Press; 1995) 130-34, and Dorothea Krook, *The Ordeal of Consciousness in Henry James* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1962) 370-89.

2. Mrs. Grose is portrayed as mastermind of the events at Bly in, for instance, Eric Solomon, "The Return of the Screw," *The University Review—Kansas City* 30 (Spring 1964) 205-11, and C. Knight Aldrich, "Another Twist to 'The Turn of the Screw'," *Modern Fiction Studies* 13 (Summer 1967) 167-78.

various readings from the basic conviction that Miles and Douglas are one and the same, their conclusions are, to me, incorrect or inconclusive. Carvel Collins was the first to draw attention, in 1955, to the parallels between Miles and Douglas, the fact that both these males were ten years younger than the governess and that they both meet her, the governess of their younger sister, during summer vacation from school/college. Suggesting, then, that Douglas' first name is Miles, and that the young boy did not die in the arms of the governess, Collins jumps to the, to me, erroneous conclusion that this maltes the reader "even more receptive to the probability that the governess is an inaccurate witness and a victim of hallucination."³ In his introduction to the *Casebook* on James' novella, Gerald Willen makes, in passing, the additional suggestion that it is possible that "the governess, in love with Miles (Douglas), and unable to act in the situation, herself wrote a story, a fiction,"⁴ but, like Collins, he takes for granted that the events at Bly did take place in one form or another.

Louis D. Rubin, Jr's 1964 article "One More Turn of the Screw" presents a more detailed analysis along the lines drawn up by Collins and Willen. He repeats, with more illustrative examples, the Miles-Douglas identification and highlights the numerous contradictions in the text as evidence of the governess' unreliability. Rubin's main contribution lies, however, in his pointing to the strikingly erotic implications of the governess-Miles relationship, and to the importance of the prologue for an understanding of the governess' story. In the prologue, Rubin shows, Douglas is peculiarly concerned about the story he is about to read. Douglas also states that the story will not tell, "in any literal, vulgar way," with whom the governess is in love, and while most critics have assumed this person to be her employer in London, Rubin proves convincingly that the text explicitly, "literally," tells of her infatuation with the uncle, and that therefore the object of her hidden love is Miles. But Rubin, like the other critics, makes the mistake of assuming that the events at Bly actually took place and that the governess was in love with the ten-year-old Miles. He states that the main objection to Douglas' having been

3. Carvel Collins, "James' *The Turn of the Screw*," *The Explicator* 13 (June 1955) item 49.

4. "Introduction," *A Casebook on Henry James' 'The Turn of the Screw'*, ed. Gerald Willen (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co, 1959) 1-2.

Miles is that "Douglas would hardly have felt kindly disposed toward a woman who had subjected him and his sister to such an ordeal as that described in the narrative,"⁵ an objection Rubin comes to terms with by explaining that Douglas, upon receiving the manuscript, is "overwhelmed by pity for the unhappy woman" and forgives her.

Subsequent interpretations of James' story that take the Miles-Douglas match as a given have added little new. Trachtenberg argues that Douglas' telling the story is a confession of his childhood guilt: "It is a story not only of the corruptibility of children, but of the continued guilt of silence, which results in a symbolic deathbed confession."⁶ Fussell correctly assumes that the governess is a writer who writes a story about a governess, but fails to investigate the story's relationship to Douglas.⁷

While these critics offer valuable insights into this alternative way of reading James' story, they do not, it seems to me, follow their own arguments to the logical end. To take one example, Rubin is correct in stating that the governess' narrative is probably not a truthful rendition of events at all, "but a story which an unmarried, middle-aged woman sent to a man shortly before her death," but he is less convincing, I think, when he continues: "a man with whom she had once been in love when he was still a boy, in order to tell him about that love." Having discussed the fact that, in this mode of reading, Miles does not die and the numerous inconsistencies⁸ and contradictions of the story, Rubin states, again correctly, that "the whole story is to be doubted, and we can be certain of nothing." His explanation for the story's openness is, however, to be doubted: he claims that it is a Jamesian trick, an "artful manipulation of facts" and a "deliberate creation of ambiguity."⁹ If one chooses to apply to the novella

5. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., "One More Turn of the Screw," *Modern Fiction Studies* 9:4 (Winter 1963-1964): 320.

6. Stanley Trachtenberg, "The Return of the Screw," *Modern Fiction Studies* 11:2 (Summer 1965): 180-82. Walter Stepp's "The Turn of the Screw: If Douglas Is Miles ...," *Nassau Review* 3:2 (1976) 76-82, merely repeats previous asuignents.

7. Edwin Fussell, "The Ontology of *The Turn of the Screw*," *Journal of Modern Literature* 8:1 (1980): 118-28.

8. As a matter of curiosity one may mention that one of the inconsistencies of James' text, not noticed by Rubin or any other critic (as far as I have been able to see), is the fact that Flora, at the age of eight, at supper still uses a high chair and a bib. See Henry James, *The Turn of the Screw*, ed. Robert Kimbrough (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1966) 8. All subsequent references to the novel are in parentheses.

9. Rubin, 319, 327.

the Miles-Douglas grid, a much more consistent explanation is at hand – that the governess' story is simply that – a story, a piece of fiction.

Let me give a synopsis of my own reading of James' text, which I hope will clarify my position as to where I agree and disagree with previous critics. While Douglas is, in a sense, Miles, it is not in the way the critics above argue. The events at Bly never took place. The governess never knew Douglas as a child; she was never in love with a ten-year-old boy. The governess' story is fiction, a mixture of romance and gothic tale; it is characterized by the stock ingredients of these genres. Simultaneously, however, the story about the events at Bly is a love letter to Douglas, speaking in code about the love he and the governess experienced during the summer when Douglas at the age of twenty met her in his home. In the disguise of a piece of fiction popular at the time, the governess makes an intimate confession not only of love but of sexual desire. *The Turn of the Screw* thus may be seen as a palimpsest, a ghost story covering the love story meant only for the eyes of Douglas.

Such a reading explains many seemingly inexplicable aspects of the text. It sheds light on the "peculiar" concern Douglas shows regarding the manuscript (1-3); ever since receiving it from the governess it has made him upset to realize the strength of the passion and longing she felt for him. It also answers the question that most readers have had in the back of their minds: How can a twenty-year-old woman fall in love with, and feel erotic attraction to, a ten-year-old boy? Such a love and attraction is much more credible between a thirty-year-old woman and a twenty-year-old college student. This approach to James' novella also integrates what is most often called the Prologue and the governess' story; the story about Bly invades the frame-tale to the point that the latter frames nothing (maybe with the exception of the reader). Finally, an interpretation along these lines explains what has puzzled critics, namely the transformation of the governess from a neurotic, or psychotic, or hysteric – all epithets have been employed to define her – at the age of twenty to, according to Douglas, a "charming," "agreeable," "awfully clever and nice" woman (2), who in the narration of the Bly story demonstrates self-control and rationality.¹⁰ The neurotic/psychotic/hysteric gov-

10. See Robert B. Heilman, "The Freudian Reading of *The Turn of the Screw*," *Modern Language Notes* 62:7 (November 1947): 442-43. As Fussell correctly points out, "novels so good as *The Turn of the Screw* are seldom written by psychotics" (Fussell 127).

erness never existed; she is a persona in a gothic romance, a vehicle for expressing the unspeakable emotions of the thirty-year-old governess.

If the Bly story is a piece of fiction, the governess must be a fiction writer, and the question arises whether the text gives evidence of such a possibility. She certainly seems to be a reader of fiction judging from the circumstance that she lets the fictional governess avail herself of the library at Bly (40) and lets her place the objects, settings, and events she encounters into a literary framework. Bly is described as a "castle of romance" as if taken out of a "story book" (10).¹¹ The narrator's metaphors are often literary, as when she describes her first lessons with Miles and Flora:

The attraction of my small charges was a constant joy, leading me to wonder afresh at the vanity of my original fears, the distaste I had begun by entertaining for the probable grey prose of my office. There was to be no grey prose, it appeared, and no long grind; so how could work not be charming that presented itself as daily beauty? It was all the romance of the nursery and the poetry of the schoolroom. (19)

A reader is not a writer, of course, but the literary references at least show that the author-governess was familiar with the conventions she would use in her own story. As has been pointed out by several critics, there are direct references to *Amelia* and *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and echoes from numerous other literary texts in the governess' story, indications of her literary sensibilities.¹²

It consequently comes as no surprise that the author-governess' story of the events at Bly is written in the same tradition as the books she has been reading, showing a close affinity particularly to the romance and the Gothic tale.¹³ Her story contains many of the features of the formula ghost

11. For a discussion of how the experiences of the governess are linked to stories and story-books, see Howard Faulkner, "Text as Pretext in *The Turn of the Screw*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 20:2-3 (Spring-Summer 1983): 90.

12. See Stanley Renner, "'Red hair, very red, close-curling': Sexual Hysteria, Physiognomical Boogymen, and the 'Ghosts' in *The Turn of the Screw*" in Henry Janz, *The Turn of the Screw*, Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism, ed. Peter G. Beidler (Boston: St Martin's Press, 1995) 233-37; Oscar Cargill, "*The Turn of the Screw* and Alice James," *PMLA* 78 (1963): 238-49; Muriel West, *A Stormy Night with The Turn of the Screw* (Phoenix, 1964).

13. See Everett Zimmerman, "Literary Tradition and *The Turn of the Screw*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 7:4 (Fall 1970): 634-35; Ronald Schleifer, "The Trap of the Imagination: The Gothic Tradition, Fiction, and 'The Turn of the Screw,'" *Criticism* 22:4 (Fall 1980): 298-300.

story: the ancient manuscript rediscovered, the remote setting, the isolated heroine, the slow emergence of the menace, and the ambiguity as to who is the victim.¹⁴ A central characteristic of the Gothic novel, according to MacAndrew, is the fact that "[b]eneath the surface fiction there is a probing of humanity's basic psychological forces, an exploration of the misty realms of the unconscious," a subsurface probing which often concerns sexuality and which makes Gothic fiction reverberate with sexual "undertones."¹⁵ The governess' story is thus not a mere exercise in the trappings of a Gothic novel, but constitutes also the governess' own very intimate confession and a potential missive to Douglas, the real subject of her story.

The author-governess' story about Miles and Flora might well be read as a coded message to Douglas. Schleifer correctly calls the narrative a "letter" to her sweetheart, but he is mistaken in his claim that the sweetheart in question is her master living in Harley Street and that the letter is "misdirected" to Douglas.¹⁶ On the contrary, the letter reaches, after long delay, its intended addressee, Douglas, her true sweetheart. Let me repeat: the Bly story is in my view a coded one. Hidden in the ghost story is the passionate love story of the governess and Douglas. It is possible, as I will attempt to do, to transpose the Miles-governess story taking place at Bly to the key of the romance between the twenty-year-old Douglas and the ten year older governess. Numerous passages of the text, it seems to me, make much better sense in the latter scenario, and, as I will show, direct quotes, now buried in the Bly story, shed light on what happened between the two lovers at Douglas' home. To make this love story come alive, I will take the liberty of speculating, with support from the text, about what the Bly story actually told Douglas when he was first exposed to it.

If the love story is an encoded one, it presupposes that somebody does the encoding. To what extent the governess as writer deliberately constructs the subsurface story of love and desire is obviously difficult to determine. The symbolic expressions, in the form of Quint and Miss Jessel, discussed below, are presumably subconscious formations, while

14. See George N. Dove, *Suspense in the Formula Story* (Bowling Green: Ohio: Bowling Green State UP, 1989) 100-103; Elizabeth MacAndrew, *The Gothic Tradition in Fiction* (New York: Columbia UP, 1979) 10.

15. MacAndrew, 8, 15-16.

16. Schleifer, "The Trap of the Imagination," 317-18.

the more explicit descriptions of the growing attachment between the governess and Miles/Douglas seem more deliberately aimed at the informed reader.

Before Douglas reads the governess' story to the "hushed little circle" round the hearth, he informs his listeners of how he met the governess and what impression she made on him. He met her at home on coming down from Trinity the second summer, and, whether she was the reason or not, he spent much time there that year (4). He found her "most charming," "agreeable," "worthy of any whatever," "awfully clever and nice," and confesses that they came to like each other "extremely" (4). They took strolls and had talks in the garden, and he recalls one conversation in particular, "the corner of the lawn, the shade of the great beeches and the long hot summer afternoon" (3). His comment on this scene might well concern the ghost story she told, but it might equally well describe the attraction that was developing between them: "It wasn't a scene for a shudder; but oh – !" (3)

If we now turn to the Bly story, the governess expects the arrival of Miles/Douglas with excitement, with a desire to be "carried away" (9) and with a fear of being "corrupted" by him (13). When he arrives, she is filled with a "passion of tenderness" (13) for him, and she takes him to her heart for "his indescribable little air of knowing nothing in the world but love" (13). In the days following, she falls under Miles/Douglas charm, but she is still convinced that she is in charge: "I found it simple, in my ignorance, my confusion and perhaps my conceit, to assume that I could deal with a boy whose education for the world was all on the point of beginning" (14). Associating with the college student she learns something that "had not been one of the teachings of [her] small smothered life":

learnt to be amused, and even amusing, and not to think for the morrow. It was the first time, in a manner, that I had known space and air and freedom, all the music of summer and all the mystery of nature. And then there was consideration – and consideration was sweet. Oh it was a trap – not designed but deep – to my imagination, to my delicacy, perhaps to my vanity; to whatever in me was most excitable. The best way to picture it all is to say that I was off my guard. (14)

This is one of the many passages that makes better sense if it is seen as expressing her initial feelings for a twenty-year-old young man than for a

ten-year-old boy. The governess has, against her will, fallen in love with Douglas and she is experiencing all the transforming sweetness of that love.

But love brings with it an additional attraction she has not bargained for, Douglas' and her own erotic desire. As many previous critics have pointed out, the ghosts Quint and Miss Jessel become the literary vehicles through which part of that desire is expressed. The author-governess thus sections off the libidinous aspects of her and Douglas' relationship into the threatening forms of Quint and Miss Jessel. Edmund Wilson and others have claimed that Quint, through his association with the tower, symbolizes male sexuality. The first meeting between the governess and Quint may stand for the author-governess' first discovery of Douglas' sexuality. Her reaction is one of fear: the occasion is as if "stricken with death." Life around her seems to stop, an "intense hush" descends on the scene: "The rooks stopped cawing in the golden sky and the friendly hour lost for the unspealable minute all its voice" (16). She feels that she has been "subject to an intrusion" (18), something that might not have happened had she not been "off guard" in her relationship with Miles/Douglas.

Her next encounter with Douglas' sexuality finds its literary expression in the Bly governess' second meeting with Quint, when he/it, looking in from the garden, appears "with a nearness that represented a forward stride in [their] intercourse" (20). Quint/Douglas' sexuality "has not been able to get in"; he/it only "peeps." And the governess wishes that "it will be confined to that!" (23) She finds him/it remarkably handsome, but at the same time – and here the sexual allusions become explicit – threatening: "He's tall, active, erect ... but never – no, never! – a gentleman" (24).

At the third encounter, the governess' fears have been somewhat allayed, and she manages to look him/it in the face: "He knew me as well as I knew him; and so, in the faint twilight ... we faced each other in our common intensity. He was absolutely, on this occasion, a living detestable dangerous presence. But that was not the wonder of wonders; I reserve this distinction for quite another circumstance: the circumstance that dread had unmistakeably quitted me and that there was nothing in me unable to meet and measure him" (41).

Through her discovery of Quint/Douglas' sexual desire, the governess

also becomes increasingly aware of her own erotic nature, an awareness that she later, as a writer, reifies in the form of Miss Jessel. The former governess of Bly, now turned ghost, is linked to the pond/lake at Bly, i. e., again according to Wilson, to female sexuality. What seems to have eluded critics, however, is the sexual nature of the pond: it has the appearance of a female sexual organ, pubic hair and all. It is "oblong in shape" and is "so narrow compared to its length that, with the ends out of view, it might have been taken for a scant river." Save for "a margin of some twenty yards, a thick copse [comes] down to the pond" (69).

On the day Flora runs away, the governess comes to the pond and sees Miss Jessel across the water, across the female sexual organ. She is "as big as a blazing fire!" (72) After the governess has found Flora and sent her home with Mrs. Grose, she remains by the pond but has no recollection of what happened: "I only knew that at the end of, I suppose, a quarter of an hour, an odorous dampness and roughness, chilling and piercing my trouble, had made me understand that I must have thrown myself, on my face, to the ground and given way to a wildness of grief" (73). She comes at this moment very close indeed to her own sexuality, her own odorous lust.

However, the amorous and sexual awakening of the governess is not only depicted in the symbolic, phantasmal form of Quint, Miss Jessel, tower, and lake. It is also very much present in the growing relationship between her and Miles/Douglas. On the night when she finds Flora looking out into the garden, she slips out into the corridor in order to find another window from which to see the apparition she is convinced Flora is watching. In the corridor she is seized by an urge to enter Miles/Douglas' room:

While I stood in the passage I had my eyes on her brother's door, which was but ten steps off and which, indescribably, produced in me a renewal of the strange impulse that I lately spoke of as my temptation. What if I should go straight in and march to his window? – What if, by risking to his boyish bewilderment a revelation of my motive, I should throw across the rest of the mystery the long halter of my boldness? (44)

The urge here is not so much to go to his window, since she has had the "temptation" for some time, as to enter his room and show him openly how she feels about him.

It is very easy to imagine that beneath the garden scene lies embedded

a similar experience taking place one night between the author-governess and Douglas, as she later told it: "As soon as I appeared in the moonlight on the terrace he had come to me as straight as possible; on which I had talten his hand without a word and led him, through the dark spaces, up the staircase where Quint so hungrily hovered for him, along the lobby where I had listened and trembled, and so to his forsalten room" (46). It is only natural that in this erotically charged scene the spirit of Quint is strongly present.

In his moonlit room she suddenly drops, sinlts upon the edge of his bed "from the force of the idea that he must know how he really, as they say, 'had' me. He could do what he lilted ... He 'had' me indeed, and in a cleft stick" (46-47). During their "short stiff brush there in the dark, he fairly [shakes] [her] with admiration" (47). She places on his shoulders her hands of tenderness, and she still remembers how "his wonderful smile, the whites of his beautiful eyes and the uncovering of his clear teeth, shine to [her] in the dusk." Her heart leaps into her mouth. He is "gentleness itself." He bends forward and kisses her. "It was practically the end of everything. I met his kiss and I had to make, while I folded him for a minute in my arms, the most stupendous effort not to cry" (47).

After this nightly scene with declarations of mutual attraction, the governess and Douglas become extremely concerned as to how they appear in public and sensitive to the unspeakable secret they are sharing:

It was as if, at moments, we were perpetually coming into sight of subjects before which we must stop short, turning suddenly out of alleys that we perceived to be blind, closing with a little bang that made us look at each other – for, like all bangs, it was something louder that we had intended – the doors we had indiscreetly opened. All roads lead to Rome, and there were times when it might have struck us that almost every branch of study or subject of conversation skirted forbidden ground. (51)

Again, a passage like this is more credible when applied to a mature love relationship than to one between a ten-year-old and a grown-up woman.

The intensity in their awareness of each other deepens. In a passage that ostensibly deals with the Bly governess' failure to make the children acknowledge their relationship to the ghosts, the palimpsest message may well speak of the friction that is continuously present between the author-governess and Douglas:

I felt myself crimson and covered my face with my hands. After these secret scenes I chattered more than ever, going on volubly enough till one of our prodigious palpable hushes occurred – I can call them nothing else – the strange dizzy lift or swim (I try for terms!) into a stillness, a pause of all life, that had nothing to do with the more or less noise we at the moment might be engaged in making and that I could hear through any intensified mirth or quickened recitation or louder strum of the piano. (53)

As time passes, a change takes place in the balance of attraction between the lovers. Gradually the governess becomes more eager to be close to Miles/Douglas, emotionally but not sexually, while he, maybe as an effect of her attention, starts withdrawing. On the way to church one Sunday morning, Miles informs the governess that he would like to return to school, and she is perturbed. There may well be a parallel here to the Douglas-governess story in which Douglas declares his intention of going back to college, a declaration so shocking to the governess that she stops dead in her tracks "as if one of the trees of the park had fallen across the road" (55). Something new has come between them, and they are both aware of it. He tells her that he cannot be with a lady always and that he needs to be getting on. She is stunned and cannot find words: "But oh how I felt that at present I must pick my own phrases! I remember that, to gain time, I tried to laugh, and I seemed to see in the beautiful face with which he watched me how ugly and queer I looked." (55) She finds her voice and tries to persuade him to stay – "if you're just as happy here" – but he replies that he "[wants] to see more life" and that he wants "[his] own sort" (56).

If this in fact is about Douglas' withdrawal from the author-governess, we may speculate as to the reasons for his hesitancy. Does he regard the ten-year-old governess as a "lady," as somebody too old for him, somebody he perhaps anticipated would be willing to give him more than she was capable of delivering? Or is his waning interest due to his homosexual leanings, as some critics have argued, a desire to be with his "own sort"? It has been argued that the relationship between Douglas and the narrator in the prologue is a homo-erotic one,¹⁷ a reading that would support the latter speculation. To me, it seems more credible that Douglas' retreat is caused by fear and false expectations: he becomes frightened by

17. Anthony J. Mazzella, "An Answer to the Mystery of *The Turn of the Screw*," *Studies in Short Fiction* 17:3 (Summer 1980): 333.

the seriousness of her passion and tired of waiting for a more tangible consummation. He does not want to get committed but wants to move on. Simultaneously, he harbors sincere feelings for her, a love he at this time of his life does not dare let forth, but which later, particularly after he has received her "letter" in the form of the manuscript, becomes affirmed within him.

In the evening of the same day, the governess goes to Miles/Douglas' room. He is in bed and is in a good mood. She sits down on the edge of the bed and asks him what he is thinking of. Assuming an amused stance, he answers: "What in the world, my dear, but you?" (62), adding that he is also thinking of the "queer business" of theirs. Her reaction is one of accomodation: "I could say nothing for a minute, though I felt as I held his hand and our eyes continued to meet that my silence had all the air of admitting his charge and that nothing in the whole world of reality was perhaps at that moment so fabulous as our actual relation." (62)

He keeps insisting on his going away and handles the sensitive situation with good-natured irony. She realizes he has the upper hand:

It overwhelmed me now that I should never be able to bear that, and it made me let myself go. I threw myself upon him and in the tenderness of my pity I embraced him. "Dear little Miles [Douglas], dear little Miles [Douglas] – !"

My face was close to his, and he let me kiss him, simply taking it with indulgent good humour. "Well, old lady?" (64)

He tells her "ever so gently" that he wants to be let alone, a statement that increases her fear of losing him and deepens her desire to conform to his wishes:

There was even a strange little dignity in it, something that made me release him, yet, when I had slowly risen, linger beside him. God knows I never wished to harass him, but I felt that merely, at this, to turn my back on him was to abandon or, to put it more truly, lose him. (64)

She drops on her knees beside his bed in order to "seize once more the chance of possessing him" (65).

There is, however, no immediate break in their relationship. Douglas and the governess continue to enjoy each others' company, as the piano scene illustrates, but Douglas makes increasingly clear that he wants to have his "freedom." She interprets his behavior as saying: "There will be plenty of time for [leaving]. I do really delight in your society and only want to show you that I contended for a principle" (66).

But at other times she sees that his freedom is not only a matter of principle; the thought of his leaving fills her with fear, even when he tries to show his appreciation: "I was conscious of a mortal coldness and felt as if I should never again be warm. So when he appeared I was sitting in the glow with my thoughts. He paused a moment by the door as if to look at me; then – as if to share them – came to the other side of the hearth and sank into a chair. We sat there in absolute stillness: yet he wanted, I felt, to be with me." (74)

As their relationship is drawing to a close, her fear makes her act rashly and indiscreetly. She tries to be composed, but the whole house is aware of her emotional strain and she sees in the servants "a confused reflexion of the crisis." She feels that the end is near and that she is "face to face with the elements," and she is barely capable of controlling herself:

It was in short by just clutching the helm that I avoided total wreck; and I dare say that, to bear up at all, I became that morning very grand and very dry. I welcomed the consciousness that I was charged with much to do, and I caused it to be known as well that, left thus to myself, I was quite remarkably firm. I wandered with that manner, for the next hour or two, all over the place and looked, I have no doubt, as if I were ready for any onset. So, for the benefit of whom it might concern, I paraded with a sick heart. (79)

Their last meal together is their briefest and most silent one. They are waiting – "as some young couple who, on their wedding journey, at the inn feels shy in the presence of the waiter" – to become alone. When the waiter leaves, Douglas/Miles turns to her and says: "Well – so we're alone!" (81) They both sense the strong bonds between them, but the governess is also aware that Douglas/Miles wants to break those bonds.

The discussion that follows is pivotal to their whole future; both of them realize the seriousness of the occasion. Steadying herself on the sofa, the governess is "prepared for the worst," but she notices that also Douglas/Miles is ill at ease: "He was admirable but not comfortable; I took it in with a throb of hope." (82)

Douglas, however, gives her no hope. He seeks to minimize the importance of their affair, maybe because he wants to leave without a bad conscience. And so he ascribes to the governess his own feelings that this was a temporary attraction that must end. "Nothing could be more charming," he assures her, "than the way you take it [his freedom], for of

course, if we're alone together now it's you that are alone most. But I hope ... you don't particularly mind!" (83) She does mind and responds: "Though I've renounced all claim to your company – you're so beyond me – I at least greatly enjoy it. What else should I stay on for?"

Douglas is touched by her sincerity. With trembling voice she goes on to tell him that, when she came to his bedroom, she had hoped he would tell her something "straight out," and that she had stayed on to hear him say it. "Do you mean now – here?" Douglas says. He is uneasy and wants to get out of this embarrassing situation. He picks up his hat, twirls it, walks over to the window. "So we circled about," the governess later wrote, "with terrors and scruples, fighters not daring to close. But it was for each other we feared! That kept us a little longer suspended and unbruised." The silence between them is so thick that "you might have heard a pin drop." Then, suddenly, Douglas discovers that he has to see Luke, a rather typical reaction of a man to run away from an embarrassing moment, to avoid having to terminate a relationship. Her response is predictable: "I had not yet reduced him to quite so vulgar a lie, and I felt proportionately ashamed. But, horrible as it was, his lies made up my truth." (84)

All the governess wants is an honest answer as to whether her feelings are reciprocated. She realizes, however, from his cowardly behavior that he will never dare affirm and express his feelings for her. And so, she must kill their love to be able to go on. And therefore, as an writer, she symbolically takes Douglas/Miles' life at the end of the story she wrote about Bly, the love letter she later sends to Douglas.

A reading like the one above raises concomitant questions: Why does Douglas take upon himself the complicit role of co-author of the Bly story? Why does he at all wish to read such a personal story to an audience unlikely to understand its underlying meaning? Before he reads the Bly story, Douglas not only gives his listeners information on the governess' background but also procures an introduction to the uncle in Harley Street and his terms of employment. Offering the latter preamble, Douglas improves on the governess' own fictional story.

The reason for his co-authorship, I think, is intimately linked to the question why he is willing to read in public the governess' love letter to himself. While Trachtenberg is correct, it seems to me, in assuming that Douglas' reading of the story is a "confession," he is not correct in his

conclusion: "Compelled by the shame of his childhood sin to conceal the story for so long, it was his need to shed the albatross of his guilt in confession that finally forced him to reveal it."¹⁸ The "confession" is rather a need to tell somebody of a secret he has carried with him for most of his life, to know that finally he has actually let the world take part of his innermost emotions, that he has let it know how he failed in his youth to seize the love that was offered him and that might have changed his life. But he cannot risk revealing the identity of his love; he does not dare tell the story "straight out." And so, to protect the sacredness of his love and the identity of his loved one, he adds yet another layer of fiction, so that the encoded message will be visible only to the few, if anyone. He gets satisfaction from revealing what has insisted on getting out, but, since the story does not tell "in any literal, vulgar way," the risk of full disclosure remains small.

18. Trachtenberg, 180.